A review of "The History of Lithuania" by Alfonsas Eidintas, Alfredas Bumblauskas, Antanas Kulakauskas, Mindaugas Tamošaitis (Vilnius, 2013; 318 pp.)

"The History of Lithuania", written by four Lithuanian historians, and commissioned by Lithuania 's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is especially disappointing. After a short introduction to the prehistory of the Baltic tribes in that part of Europe, the book covers Lithuania's political, economic and cultural history from the beginning of the Lithuanian state in the thirteenth century under king Mindaugas, to its current membership in the European Union and NATO.

The Foreign Ministry's web page states that this book is intended to be "a new and valuable source of information for foreign diplomats, politicians, civil servants, and everyone else interested in the subject of Lithuania's political history." The book was commissioned to coincide with Lithuania's Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU), which began on July 1, 2013.

In spite of much useful information not otherwise readily available, the book contains serious errors, so much so that after it was published and distributed in six translations, including English, the Ministry as of this writing is planning to prepare a revised edition.

But, because copies of this flawed edition remain in general circulation, and, thus will continue to be read, it is useful to identify some of the errors in the book, so that any reader would understand the book's limitations, and the necessity of caution in accepting its assertions. This review examines the English language edition, but since all six translations derive from the same original Lithuanian text, comments here about the book's contents should be applicable to the editions in German, French, Spanish, Polish, and Russian as well.

The book, as a prelude to discussing the post-World War II Soviet occupation of Lithuania, makes the astonishing statement that "In the summer of 1944, Soviet military forces liberated Lithuania from Nazi Germany." The truth is quite the opposite, for instead of liberation, Stalin's red terror merely replaced Hitler's brown terror. Consider - when the evening shift of prison guards takes over from the day shift, are the prisoners being liberated?

The book goes on to assure the reader that there was, indeed, a "positive" side to the 50 years of Soviet occupation: *"Lithuanians learned the Russian language well and directly benefited from the great achievements of Russian culture",* and that during Soviet occupation Lithuania's economy did not do as badly as those of occupied neighbors Latvia and Estonia, and that the Soviets built a good system of roads in the country.

Such praise of Soviet "achievements" has no legitimacy in any sense. During its two decades of independence between the World Wars, though burdened by the legacy of over a century's of Czarist Russia's repressive policies, Lithuanian society was fully oriented towards Western Europe and was on its way to achieving Western standards in its economy and infrastructure. And if it had been allowed to remain an independent nation, Lithuania, just like the rest of Western Europe, would have achieved and continued to surpass anything that the Soviets were capable of providing its citizens.

It is simply bizarre to praise Soviet built roads and other Soviet introduced "benefits". The Soviets imposed a brutal regime on Lithuania that led not to achievements, but to wholesale poverty – poverty in spirit, in culture and in economics. And for a Lithuanian historian, whose country suffered greatly from 50 years of Soviet imposed repression, it is almost as if Lithuanian prisoners, after being transported in railroad freight cars to Stalin's gulags, were then to write letters to Stalin praising the efficiency of his railroads. By any measure, the praise of imputed Soviet benefits and achievements reads like a page out of a Soviet propaganda pamphlet, and has no place in a history text.

Continuing with its novel perspective on the Soviet occupation, the book asserts that the reason Lithuania did not militarily resist the first Soviet occupation in 1940, was because it was thought that opposing the Soviets would make Lithuania an enemy not only of the USSR, but of both France and Great Britain, and that would cost Lithuania dearly after the war.

Not only is that assertion factually incorrect, but in 1940 the Soviets were allies not of the West but of Nazi Germany under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, and together with Germany the Soviets dismembered Poland, itself an ally of both France and Great Britain. So, contrary to the book's assertion, any opposition to the Soviets at that time would have instead allied Lithuania not against but with France and Great Britain.

Poland's 1920 military occupation and subsequent annexation of Lithuania's capital Vilnius and its region remains a sore point between these two countries even today. The book simply states that *" in the 1922 election that took place by Polish decree in the territory . . . it was decided that it shall become a part of Poland "*.

The facts are that in 1920 Poland, broke the Suvalkai treaty that it had signed with Lithuania just a few days before, and by force of arms, seized the Vilnius region, militarily occupying Lithuania's historical capital. Poland then, in 1922 orchestrated an "election" under military occupation, by which it formally annexed the territory. The League of Nations observers of that election noted the coercive circumstances, and concluded that:

"Given the fact that the Lithuanians, the Jews and a large part of the Belorussians officially abstained from taking part in the elections, and that, on the other hand, the elections were carried out under military occupation, whereby the Polish element had at its disposal all the government's means of pressure, it does not seem that one can consider the present [Vilnius] *assembly a true and sincere expression of the entirety of the population in the territory."*

Numerous other errors and omissions can be found throughout this book. A few such examples: The treaty between Lithuania and the Soviet Union of October 10, 1939, which allowed the USSR to bring its army into Lithuania, was not signed in Vilnius, as stated in the book, but was signed in Moscow. The 16th Lithuanian Rifle Division of the Red Army did not, as stated, participate in 1945 in combat in Prussia or in Berlin. The Vilnius region was not severely damaged during the 1939 Russian-German Polish campaign, in fact it was hardly damaged at all, since there had been no major battles in that region. All rulers of Lithuania after King Mindaugas did not negotiate Christianization of the then pagan country. Grand Duke Gediminas did not adopt Christianity, and did not establish a Catholic archdiocese.

In addition to outright errors in content, the book does not adequately address a foreign audience, even though it is intended for foreign distribution. Names, places and events, unknown to the world at large, are often mentioned without explanation of who or what they are, or what their significance is. The English translation is at times also extremely awkward, and lends itself to ridicule by English readers and reviewers – think of the dialogue in the film *"Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan"*, where an unsophisticated peasant from Kazakhstan continuously mangles the English language.

In Western historiography, Lithuania, being a small country on the periphery of Central Europe, is often allotted no more than a footnote. And since few western historians are able to access Lithuanian sources because of the language barrier, whatever little is published about Lithuania, of necessity mostly relies on neighboring Russian, Polish or German sources.

But significant periods of Lithuania's past – from the thirteenth through the twentieth centuries – and thus much of Lithuania's history, consist of repeated conflicts with, and aggression and at times subjugation by, those same larger and more powerful neighbors. Consequently, relying on those neighboring sources, at times is as if, for example, Israel's history were to be written solely from the point of view of Arab chroniclers. Clear illustrations of this

can be found in Russia's continuing attempts to rehabilitate its Stalinist era by papering over, and thus distorting, much of that regime's criminal policies, including those that were imposed on Lithuania during the Soviet Union’s brutal 50 year occupation of the country.

Thus, Lithuanian history as experienced and recorded by Lithuanians themselves, should provide a welcome addition not only for the interested reader, but also add to the historian's tools in navigating through the diverging perspectives and various intentional and unintentional biases.

But because of the many errors and omissions scattered throughout the book, a reader cannot with confidence rely on any portion of the book without independently verifying the material. This is especially unfortunate, since otherwise the book could fill a useful gap in Lithuanian historiography. To that end, it is hoped that the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expedites its plans to correct the book's flaws, and that corrected editions are published in Lithuanian and all six translations.

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